

History of Psychiatry

<http://hpy.sagepub.com/>

Death-coincidences or wishful thinking? The Society for Psychical Research and the 1894 Census of Hallucinations

T.R. Dening

History of Psychiatry 1994 5: 397

DOI: 10.1177/0957154X9400501908

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://hpy.sagepub.com/content/5/19/397.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *History of Psychiatry* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://hpy.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://hpy.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 1, 1994

[What is This?](#)

Classic Text No. 19

**Death-coincidences or wishful thinking?
The Society for Psychical Research and the
1894 Census of Hallucinations**

Introduction by
T. R. DENING*

Psychical research

The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in 1882 with the aim of objective examination by scientists and scholars of the phenomena of spiritualism. It was a result of two strong influences: spiritualism and a reaction against materialism by intellectuals assailed at the same time by religious doubt.¹ Spiritualism began in America in the late 1840s, but rapidly spread to Britain stimulated by visits of celebrated mediums. From about 1870, this area was studied by a group in Cambridge whose members were characterized by evangelical Christian backgrounds, great sensitivity and religious uncertainty.

Although the foundation of the SPR was proposed by William Barrett, Professor of Physics in Dublin, the driving force behind the Society was provided by the Cambridge trio of Frederic W.H. Myers (1843–1901),

* Address for correspondence: T. R. Dening, Consultant Psychiatrist, Psychiatric Services for the Elderly, Fulbourn Hospital, Cambridge CB1 5EF.

¹ More detailed descriptions of the origins and development of the SPR are to be found in: Gauld A., *The Founders of Psychical Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968); Oppenheim J., *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England. 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Williams J. P., 'Psychical research and psychiatry in late Victorian Britain: trance as ecstasy or trance as insanity', in: *The Anatomy of Madness. Volume 1. People and Ideas*, edited by W. F. Bynum, R. Porter and M. Shepherd (London: Tavistock, 1985), 233–54.

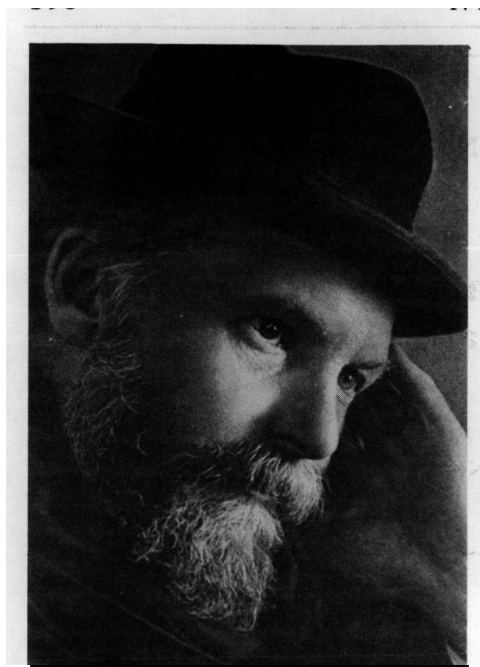


Fig. 1 FREDERIC MYERS (1843–1901)

fell in love with his cousin's wife, and after her suicide in 1876, his interest in spiritualism appears to have been fired by attempts to reach her again. Gurney (Fig. 2), also from a clerical family, aspired after a career in music. He was unsuccessful in this and also in attempts at medicine and law, hampered by great sensitivity to the distress of others² and by a probable bipolar mood disorder. By 1882, he was therefore in a mid-life crisis, which he resolved to some extent by becoming the energetic Secretary of the SPR for six years, until his mysterious death, possibly suicide,³ in 1888. Sidgwick, Professor of Moral

Edmund Gurney (1847–1888) and Henry Sidgwick (1838–1899). At the insistence of Myers and Gurney, Sidgwick became the first President. The influence of these three increased after five years as many of the spiritualist members soon resigned. Their contributions were distinctive and related to major aspects of their lives and characters.

Myers (Fig. 1) was perhaps the single most crucial figure. Son of a Lakeland clergyman, he was an extremely sensitive individual who wrote poetry, winning several prizes as a student. He was seized by enthusiasms for the Classical world and then Christianity, before his faith weakened, leaving him rather desperate at the ensuing void. He

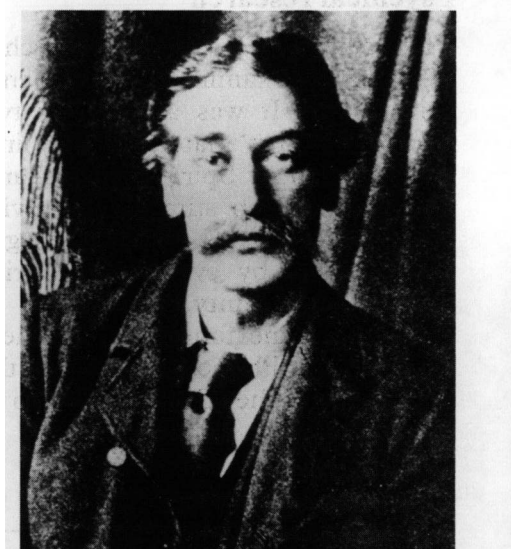


Fig. 2 EDMUND GURNEY (1847–1888)

² George Eliot was impressed by Gurney's humanity and good looks, and the character of Daniel Deronda is said to be in part based upon him. See Gauld, *op. cit.*, 175.

³ For extensive discussion, see Hall T. H., *The Strange Case of Edmund Gurney* (London: Duckworth, 1964).

Philosophy at Cambridge from 1883, was an extremely respected establishment figure, related by marriage to a Prime Minister and an Archbishop of Canterbury. He was the leader of a group of Cambridge fellows who discussed the problems for religious faith posed by contemporary scientific advances. Also a man with enormous religious yearnings, his intellectual honesty left him in a position of great doubt. Thus, all three could not accept orthodox religion but felt threatened by materialism and strove for evidence to support their general optimism about the world.

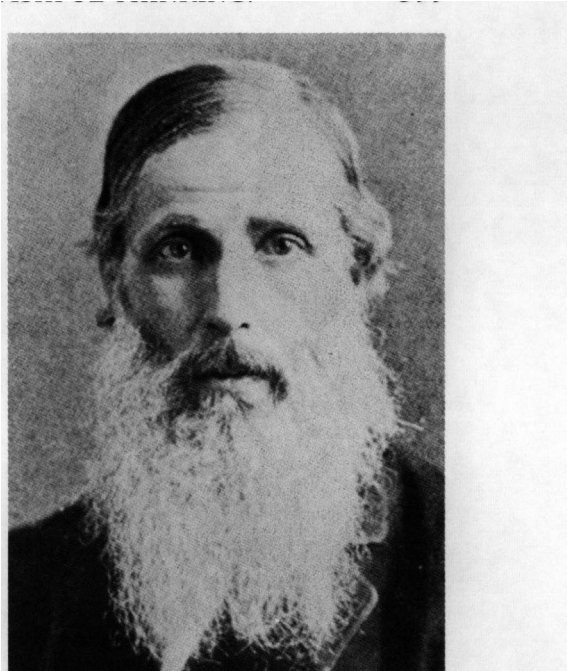


Fig. 3 HENRY SIDGWICK (1838–1899)

The early researches of this group involved examining many alleged mediums for physical effects, e.g. table-tilting, materializations, but for various reasons (such as the exposure of several frauds, and the intellectualism of the group) the SPR became more interested in more psychological phenomena. A particular interest was in telepathy and the question of so-called coincidental or veridical hallucinations (e.g. where A experiences an apparition of B at the same time as B is in crisis, usually dying, elsewhere) as putative evidence for telepathy, either between living persons or as communications from the dead.

The Census of Hallucinations

The Census was undertaken between 1889 and 1892, and formed the largest single part of an international census of waking hallucinations of the sane,⁴ generated by the 1889 International Congress of Psycho-Physiology in Paris. The Census followed on directly from a similar study performed by Gurney and included in his major work, *Phantasms of the Living*.⁵ In this, he surveyed

⁴ Other centres participating included Paris (chief investigator: L. Marillier; N = 3393 subjects), Boston (William James; N = 6311), and Munich (Baron von Schrenck-Notzing; N = 625). The results are summarized in Parish E., *Hallucinations and Illusions: A Study of the Fallacies of Perception* (London: Walter Scott, 1897).

⁵ Myers F. W. H., Gurney E., Podmore F., *Phantasms of the Living* (London: Trubner, 1886) The bulk of this work was written by Gurney, the aim being to bring together data from 'experimental' and spontaneously reported instances. The arguments were heavily criticized by several reviewers and were weakened by the subsequent exposure of some of the subjects studied.

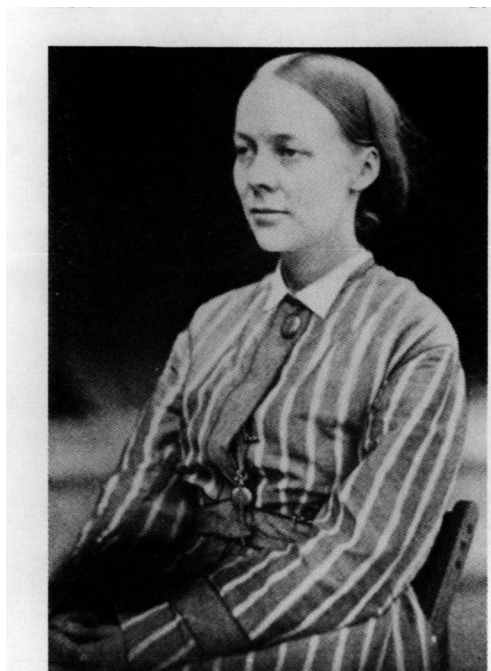


Fig. 4 ELEANOR MILDRED SIDGWICK
(née Balfour) (1845–1936)

6000 people, and calculated that the occurrence of coincidental hallucinations was greater than chance expectation. The Census was intended to build upon Gurney's survey, with larger numbers (intended sample was 50 000), and to respond to criticisms of method. As with other work by the SPR, the task was undertaken by a committee which consisted of Henry Sidgwick and his wife Nora, Miss Alice Johnson, Myers and his brother Arthur (died 1894),⁶ and Frank Podmore. The project was probably conceived by the now-deceased Gurney. Most of the analysis and writing was performed by Mrs Sidgwick and Miss Johnson. Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick (née Balfour; 1845–1936) (Fig. 4) had a mathematical background and revelled in abstract mental problems. She was Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge, from 1892 to 1900, and was its Treasurer for 39 years until 1919.⁷

The Census examined visual, auditory and tactile hallucinations, aiming to exclude those due to dreams, delirium, insanity or other predisposing cause. There was a screening question,⁸ followed up by a schedule of 5 questions and space for further information. Data were gathered by 410 collectors, appointed by the SPR. Altogether 17,000 responses were obtained, with 2272 answering 'yes' to the screening question. Many of these were discarded as not meeting the survey criteria, and eventually 1942 examples involving 1684 subjects (9.9% of the sample) were analysed. The findings were published in *Proceedings of the SPR*.⁹ The report was nearly 400 pages

⁶ Arthur Thomas Myers (1851–1894) is of interest to medical historians as Hughlings Jackson's famous patient, Dr Z, who had complex epileptic seizures associated with a temporal lobe lesion found at postmortem. See: Taylor D.C., Marsh S.M., 'Hughlings Jackson's Dr Z: the paradigm of temporal lobe epilepsy revealed', *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry*, xliii (1980), 758–767.

⁷ Further biographical information in: Sidgwick E., *Mrs Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1938).

⁸ 'Have you ever, when believing yourself to be completely awake, had a vivid impression of seeing or being touched by a living being or inanimate object, or of hearing a voice; which impression, so far as you could discover, was not due to any external physical cause?'

⁹ *Proceedings of the SPR*, x (1894), 25–422.

long with 17 chapters, conclusion and appendices. Its text has 3 parts: methods, description of the hallucinations, and evidence for telepathy. The third section reflected the main aim of the project, but the middle section is probably of most psychiatric interest: for example, Chapters 4 and 5 discuss with copious examples the distinction of true hallucinations from other perceptions, such as normal perception, dreams, mental imagery and pseudohallucinations, and illusions. The form and content of hallucinations are also discussed, together with other associated features, including demography, possible precipitating factors, and accompanying autonomic phenomena.

Which portion of the text to select for reproduction in *History of Psychiatry* posed a question of choice between, on the one hand, the relatively straightforward descriptions of hallucinations, and on the other, the more speculative (and to a psychiatric readership, less familiar) discussion of evidence for telepathy. I have opted for the latter as being more central to the concerns of the SPR authors. Chapter XII has been abridged by omitting several lengthy accounts of death-coincidences (though the first case described in the chapter has been retained to give some flavour of the material) and the linking sections of text, though the arguments have been preserved. Chapter XIII is presented intact except for the omission of 7 short footnotes.

Discussion

It is now 100 years since the Census of Hallucinations was published. It does not seem to have been accorded a place in the psychiatric canon, presumably because psychiatrists have mistrusted the metaphysical agenda underlying the study. It is also possible with a selective reading to dismiss the entire output of the SPR as being the work of naïve, credulous eccentrics.¹⁰ However, this would be an oversimplification. To evaluate the Census and the work of the SPR it is necessary to look at them in their own cultural and historical context. What matters is less whether this work was successful in demonstrating paranormal events, but more how the ideas and methods developed and what subsequent influence they had.

The methodological flaws of the Census are fairly obvious. The sample was selected largely through the SPR, and the validation of 'veridical' hallucinations would nowadays be inadequate. The calculation of the expectation of chance coincidence is flawed: in particular the chance of a death is that for a *given* individual, whereas any of a number of relatives/friends might be involved. However, by nineteenth-century standards the methodology was reasonably good and well thought out. For

¹⁰ Hall, *op. cit.* (Ref. 3) is very scathing.

example, the authors tried to avoid certain biases, such as the possibility of their collectors selecting known cases of veridical hallucinations. The descriptive data of the earlier chapters stands in its own right as a large body of data from a 'normal' population and challenges the notion that hallucinations are necessarily pathological.

The SPR's work must also be seen in the same way. Its members were certainly not blind adherents of spiritualism, and indeed contributed to the exposure of several fraudulent mediums. In their exploration of the apparent void between religion and materialism, they (especially Gurney) contributed to the evolution of a *psychological* perspective,¹¹ and importantly challenged the reductionist medical view that all strange experiences were organic and abnormal.

Why then did their ideas not become more widely influential? One reason was the premature deaths of leading SPR members. Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick all died within 20 years of the SPR's foundation, only the latter reaching age 60. Second, the SPR was an élite, non-populist, intellectual organization,¹² which had moved away from the humbler spiritualists. Third, unlike more successful psychological approaches, such as Freud or Janet, there was no agreed body of dogma – Myers' philosophy was intensely personal, grossly overwritten and indigestible. The SPR were an intellectual, not a professional, body, and no approach to treatment (analogous to psychoanalysis) was suggested by their studies. Finally, the early twentieth-century was to witness the rise of behaviourism and the discrediting of introspection as an experimental method.

Doubtless in another 100 years time, some aspects of current psychological research will seem risible to our successors. The Census perhaps shows us that data gathered for one investigation may be useful to later researchers with other purposes in mind. In addition, there has been a recent tendency to regard hallucinations as necessarily pathological: a reaction against this view is overdue and there remains an unmet need for an adequate community study of fallacious perceptions.¹³

¹¹ See, for example, his important theoretical review of hallucinations: Gurney E., 'Hallucinations', *Mind*, x (1885), 161–199.

¹² Élite, but powerfully supported. For example, in 1894, the SPR had over 800 members and associates with another 600 or so in its American branch. Its President was then William James. Vice-Presidents included Arthur Balfour, MP (brother of Nora Sidgwick), The Marquis of Bute and Lord Rayleigh. Among the membership were Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry M. Stanley and J. J. Thomson (discoverer of the electron). W. E. Gladstone, John Ruskin and Alfred Russel Wallace were honorary members.

¹³ e.g. Klemperer, F. 'Hallucinations: a survey of two hundred apparently healthy adults'. Paper presented at Royal College of Psychiatrists' Annual Meeting, 1993.